

AUTRE

YAYOI KUSAMA



**YAYOI REVISITED: AN INFINITE TÊTE-À-TÊTE
HARMONY KORINE, AGNÈS VARDA, VAL KILMER
PETER SHIRE, ANDRES SERRANO, JUDITH BERNSTEIN
PLUS A VISIT TO HAUSER & WIRTH SOMERSET**



WEST OF MEMPHIS

PETER SHIRE is an anomaly. A ceramicist, first and foremost, Shire is also one of the only consistent American members of the iconic Memphis Milano design and architecture group. The furniture, objects, and ephemera produced by the group changed the concept of design and its approach forever. Lauded, hated, and lauded again, Memphis Milano is back in the spotlight - both as reverence for the past and a vision for the future. As the only West Coast cohort of Ettore Sottsass' band of misfit outliers, Shire enjoyed a different wave of influence - one that was separated by a continent and steeped in the neighborhood traditions of Echo Park where he grew up. Shire still works at his bustling ceramics studio there and lives only blocks away in an historic midcentury home. Some of Shire's most iconic pieces are his "Bel Air" armchair (which he plans on re-releasing in 2018), his "Brazil" table, and, of course, his teacups. Shire is also in the process of creating a monograph of his work, and is planning for a show in Italy. We stopped by Shire's studio to discuss Memphis Milano, the influence of Ettore Sottsass and what makes the perfect chair.

interview by **OLIVER MAXWELL KUPPER**
photographs by **JOHNNY LE**

OLIVER KUPPER: Do you feel like more people are knocking on your door, asking questions about Memphis?

PETER SHIRE: It's hard to put one's finger on it. Memphis is back. Did it go somewhere? You know, it's always been around.

You came to the launch party for our recent issue and gave us two teacups, which was really generous. Sharing seems like it's a big practice of yours.

It's because of James Brown.

Yeah?

Yeah, because he basically would say, "Don't forget who I am and where I came from and who put me where I am," but he also was relentless in his performance just for that reason. He went on and on. I mean have you ever seen any of it? I mean there are tapes. He was like that. You'd think, this is when he's going off, he's done 2 encores, just pulled himself up with the splits right in front of you, and the most fabulous thing was that he always threw a set of cufflinks to the crowd.

I had no idea.

Yeah, he would throw them right into the spotlight of course and they'd go glittering out over, and someone would catch a cufflink. It was like going to the baseball game and catching a home run.

So interesting. I want to talk about your teacups.

My teacups are a hilarious take on the middle class. I'm a potter. I was trained as a ceramacist. I have a degree in ceramics, from high school and from art school. And for teapots - I probably made one in high school, I can't remember.

What else did you make back then?

Weed holders were big at this time. It was fabulous. Because they are beautiful right? It was quite a feeling of that moment.

So that was the foundation of your ceramics career?

Yes. I was very serious about ceramics. Which leads us to the question, and the question was: What about those teapots? Teapots are the ultimate object. We'd go down to Japanese town and get the replacement bamboo handles - I'd make half a dozen teapots.

How old were you at this point?

19 maybe?



Above: Peter Shire in Milan, Italy, 1980
© Peter Shire Studio

Below: Peter Shire with his "Brazil" table,
at the first Memphis Milano show in Milan, Italy, 1981
© Peter Shire Studio





When did the teapots become sculptural?

The teapots evolved and I had this idea of using them in a sculptural format because they have so many parts.

Can you talk a little about the idea of post-pottery?

Post-pottery. Yeah, I'm post-pottery. At least I'm not just as dumb as a post. I think. (chuckles) I have my prejudices. Everybody has a high school book and a high school movie. They're very telling. Mine is "Man and Superman" by George Bernard Shaw. I actually just reread it last week. Have you ever read it?

No.

It's sort of funny because it's kind of dated. Not dated, but of another era, and Shaw was very didactic about his form of socialism. He was what you would call a Fabian socialist, which I'm not sure what that means but that's what he was. Probably today he'd be called a limousine liberal. My movie was Black Orpheus, which I attribute to making a wreck of my

early attempts to get laid. Have you seen it?

Yeah, I have.

It's this fantastic vision of the favelas.

'60s, right?

Yeah, late '50s - '58, '59. You know my parents went to see all these movies and I went with them. Black Orpheus is about two young lovers.

We were talking a little bit about teenage sexual frustration earlier. I want to ask about your splatters...

You think I'm coming onto cups?

Maybe there's something Freudian there. Why did you first start doing the splatters?

You know what Freud said, "Sometimes a good cigar is just a good cigar." Splatters, unfortunately, has just one story. I could lie.

You could lie.

I have to dig one up. My friends worked for Sam Francis. I was making cups. I thought it was really funny; you could get the same treatment for ten dollars.

When did you first meet Ettore Sottsass.

Late '79. I'd been hearing about him. I have the book, *Italy New Domestic Landscapes*, and my friend bought it for me in '71, I guess. This thing in particular I was very influenced by; this group of foam shapes all fit together in a square. I had done pieces that spin off of that and was very influenced by the whole business. And then, of course, my friend brought this book, and Ettore's thing is in it. I thought it was really interesting - I'm trying to think of a better word than cool. It was really important, but I didn't like the imagery. I didn't like the kind of 2001 Space Odyssey look of it. It is sort of an anomaly for Ettore. It sort of verges into all those weird mirrors and stuff he did that one curator recently described as, "stuff that no one would want to buy."

Sounds like something a curator would say.

It was very hippie-ish. Kind of slick hippie, or sort of like if Manson had gone into Sharon Tate's apartment and she would have had that kind of a look. Sort of *Barbarella*.



Oh yeah, Barbarella. It's incredible - Jane Fonda.

So you know, when she kills the pleasure machine. Ettore did this stuff and...quite a few people really gave it a lot of play. You know what it looks like? It looks like the plastic bins that milk and soda pop are delivered in. They really make great stepstools, but they really are miserable bits of industrial stuff.

What was it like visiting Ettore's studio?

I was looking around and

eventually I looked behind this accordion door and there was a bit of his archive. All this stuff that he's done and I thought to myself, "I saw this. I dug this." It was one of those things where you've been doing something and then you realize it's been done. So, he had seen my things and I didn't know where until much later and he had sent Aldo and Matteo from Casa Vogue to find what I had done out in California and these two Italian guys, they had the best shoes, you know the kind of tennis shoes that you're always looking for and they just don't sell in America? Anyway, we had a great time.

What was your approach before Memphis?

When you're in school, it's a protected environment and you're taught to just make things. And the way that it worked at Chouinard was that they had a foundation and we would look at how the various instructors would approach design. One was a guy named William Moore. Everybody said that he was really good, but he was actually just really aggressive and offensive. He's the guy who burned Ed Ruscha's painting on the wall in this famous episode where he went into a student show and just lit it up.

Wow.

He had good taste and he also gave me a very bad grade, so I knew that I was in good company.

There were other Americans working with the Memphis Group, but you were pretty much the only American consistently making work with them. Why do you think that was?

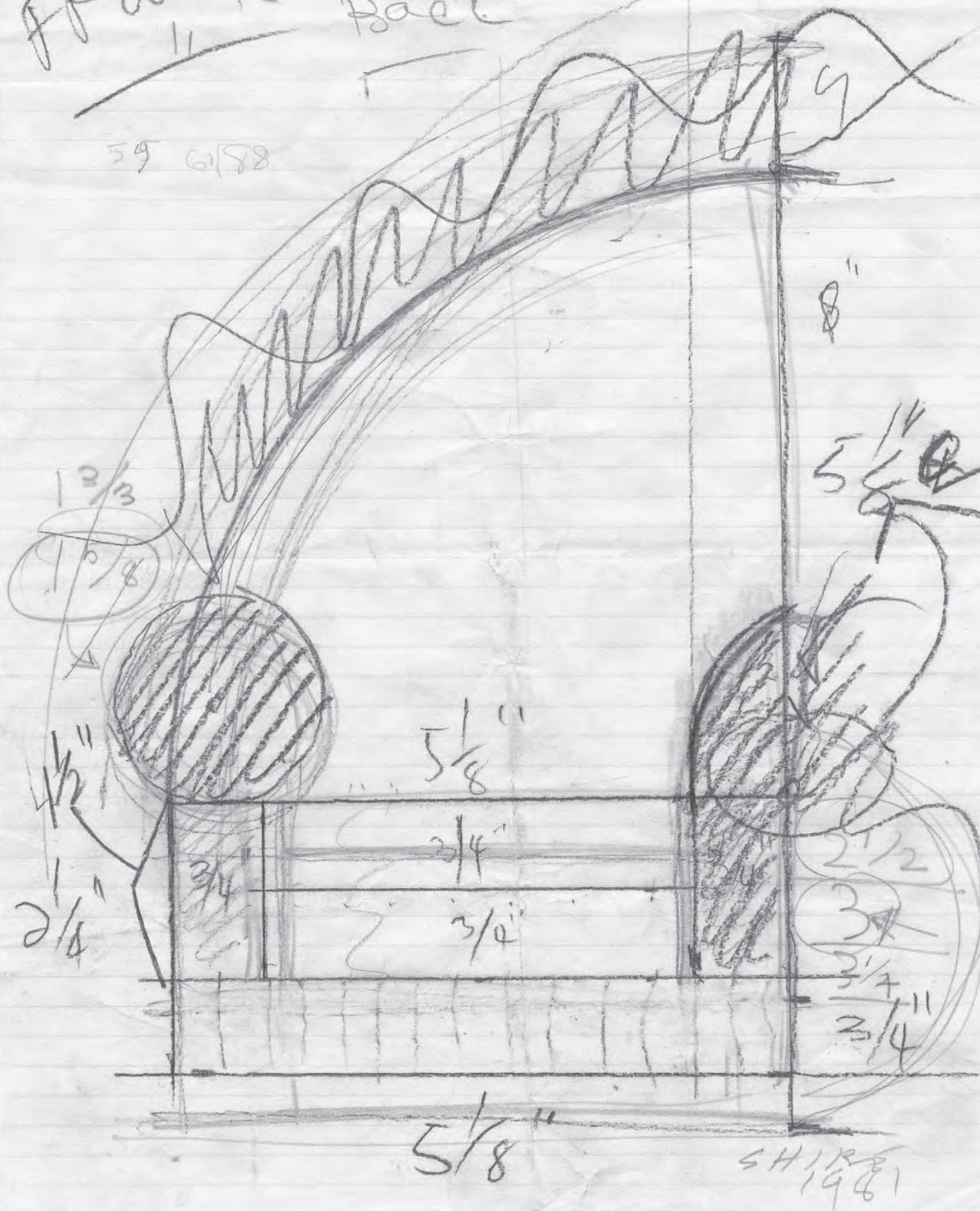
Well, the only non-architect. There were all kinds of reasons. If there's one that is bigger than the rest, I'll figure it out while I write my book. I'm trying to understand my perception through understanding other people's perceptions. In the case of Memphis, a lot of Italians.

What makes a perfect chair?

It's a question on a sliding scale, because at the moment most of the chairs I'm making are not meant to be sat in. At least, not more than a test-drive. It's a simple equation for the perfect chair. If it's padded enough, it will be comfortable. That's sort of the back end of the question. I made a sofa for a guy named Richard Tuttle and he was the former

Frank called
Back

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ambassador to England under W Bush. We did this sofa that's the King Rat of sofas and he said that this is the first time I've ever had a sofa that I could take a nap on, because he was a tall guy. So at any given moment, what's your criteria? Can you take a nap? Can you sit in it for two hours straight? See, back at the turn of the century they made three sizes of chair: A woman's chair, a medium chair, and a man's chair.

The perfect chair also has to be beautiful.
I agree with that.

It's not all about comfort. If it was, then we would all be in La-Z-Boy's.
The antichrist. Donna keeps telling me that I need to design a good-looking La-Z-Boy.

You have to be able to put a beer in it.
It's like a perfect date. La-Z-Boy. I love the dashes. It's like a fifties thing. Like Bowl-O-Rama. Yeah, La-Z-Boy. I believe Design Within Reach has one.

Have you seen it? It's okay. It just doesn't go all the way back. It's more like a really chic airplane seat. I just don't think it has that monster quality.

Like the Bel Air chair.
The famous one.

You made a couple versions of that chair.
Why stop?

How did Ettore influence you?
Isn't it interesting that I was able to meet this famous guy. There was no doubt that this was a person I was gaga about. When we first met I thought he was an important person. Everybody that they liked was simpatico. We understood without definition because some of these words were untranslatable. See, English is a perfect language for mechanics. But we don't have that many words for love, and Italian really veers into that non-descript, indescribable realm. So everybody began *simpatico* and after a few years everybody became *fabulous*. Big change in the emotional overview.



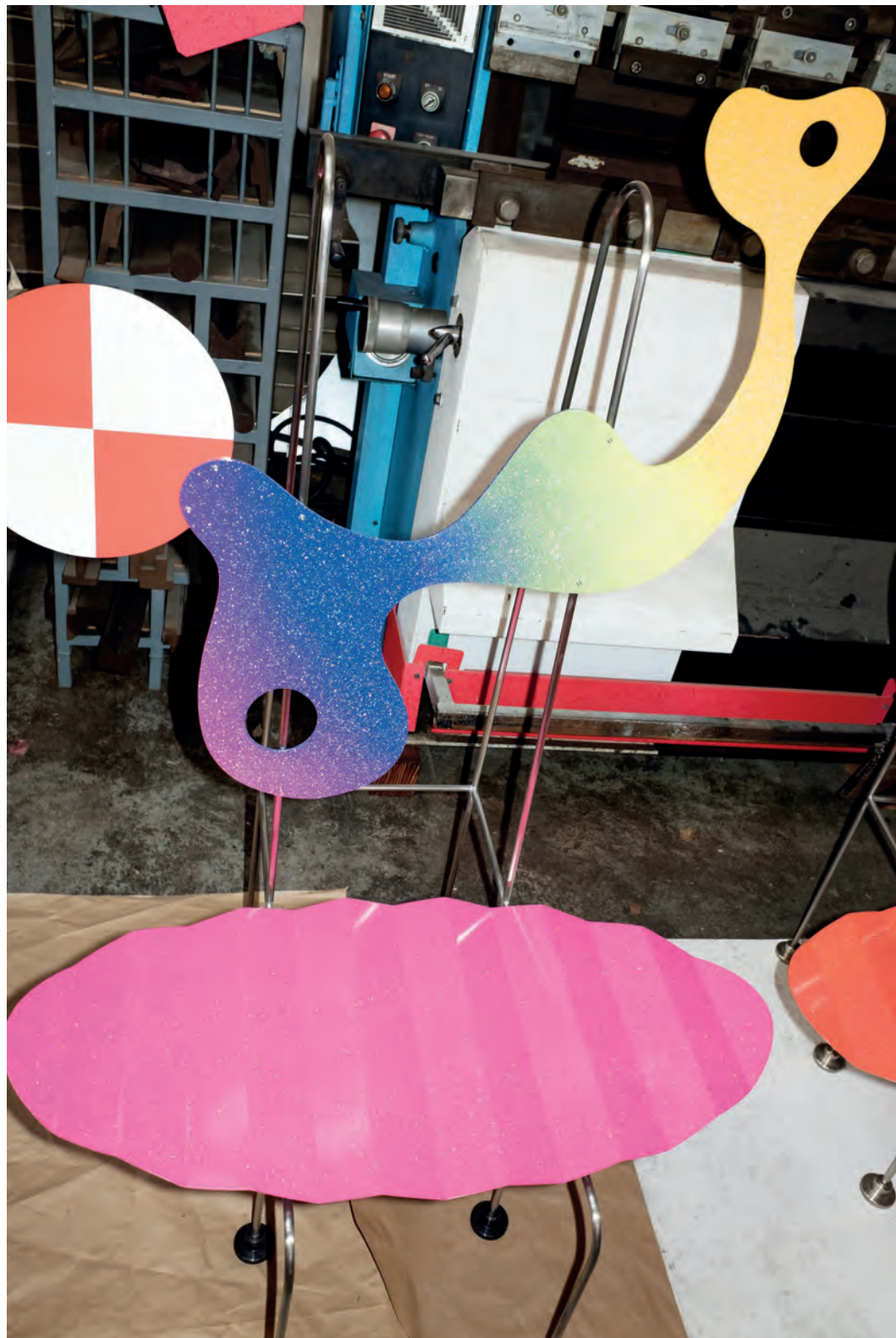
Where does Donna fit into your creative process?

My wife? She, early on, gave up her career in graphic design partly to manage my studio, and I wanted her to have some control over me. I went to go see *Ran* and there was this line between the King and his assistant and they were talking about how one of his sons is being manipulated by his wife and the King says, "It's the hand that pets the cock that makes it crow." I think that about sums it up.

How does her taste differ from yours?

I'll ask her stuff and her taste is way more rigorous than mine and way more design-oriented. I think that's because of her graphic design background. She'll tend to be more conforming and I'm always trying to break out. So I'll ask, "What do you think of this...back of this chair, because it's giving me a little moment?" And she'd say, "I don't like that one," because she's concerned with what people will think, and she's conscious of my not having body odor when we go out in public.

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Opposite Page: Ettore Sottsass and Peter Shire
in New Orleans, 1981
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